



# The Risk Communiqué

Winter 2009

Welcome to this edition of *The Risk Communiqué*, a quarterly newsletter devoted to sharing insights about risk communication policies, philosophies, and practices. If you received this issue, you probably bought a copy of *Risk Communication: A Handbook for Communicating Environmental, Safety, and Health Risks* or met the

primary author at a conference, training session, or consultation. This newsletter is being provided to help you communicate complex scientific and technical information.

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## Why They Don't Leave: Lessons Learned from Studies of Hurricane Warnings

In any natural disaster, risk communication plays a key role. Hurricanes in particular require government agencies to issue specific information and repeated warnings. Yet some members of the population fail to respond as expected. What prompts people to obey or ignore hurricane warnings?

Joye Gordon of Kansas State University led a team of researchers to answer this question by gathering data in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and Hurricane Gustav in 2008. The most recent study involved 300 residents of seven parishes in southeast Louisiana, all of which were issued mandatory evacuation orders for Hurricane Gustav.

"A mandatory evacuation order is just a label," Gordon said in an article for the school's online magazine. "There isn't a legal right to throw people out of their homes. A mandatory evacuation is highly, highly suggested, but if people don't get that message, don't trust the message, or their cost-benefit analysis tells them to reject that

message, they may not move out of harm's way."

Other factors that influence evacuation behavior, according to Gordon, include financial well-being, education level, trust in government, mobility issues, race, age, and gender.

"Natural disasters do not affect all people the same," Gordon said. "In fact, the poor, disenfranchised, and otherwise marginalized portions of society are the ones who are most impacted by natural disasters. The more affluent you are, the easier it is to evacuate and prepare for a disaster."

The study found that another factor which influences evacuation behavior is a person's past travel behavior. Those who had traveled rarely in the past were more likely to ignore evacuation orders.

What does this mean for risk communicators? Simply issuing a warning, even with high levels of repetition, may not do the job. No amount of communication can make up for evacuation plans that don't address the needs of all parts of the population, especially those

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## Lessons Learned from Studies of Hurricane Warnings

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who would find evacuation difficult for financial, physical, or mental reasons. For both risk communicators and emergency planners, understanding the audience is key. For more information on Gordon's research, see <http://www.infozine.com/news/stories/op/storiesView/sid/32476/>.

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### Report Details Breakdown, Recommends Unity in Risk Communications

A recent report from The Pew Charitable Trusts at Georgetown University details exactly how risk communication failed during a disease outbreak. The report, *Breakdown: Lessons to Be Learned from the 2008 Salmonella Saintpaul Outbreak*, represents an in-depth review of the public record of the outbreak, which caused illnesses in more than 1,400 people across the country in the summer of 2008.

Congressional leaders and industry representatives have called for public health officials to analyze the public health system's response to the outbreak. The report is an effort to frame questions that such an analysis should consider. In particular, the report focuses on food safety policy; the public health system's organization, capacity, and effectiveness in the outbreak response; and risk communications with the media and the public.

For the risk communication section, report authors reviewed all of the public statements and web site postings of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and

Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the key federal agencies charged with communicating about the outbreak; the transcripts of the FDA/CDC media calls; press releases and web site postings by state public health departments and industry trade associations related to the outbreak; and media coverage from around the country. In addition, they attended and monitored the oversight hearings held by Congressional committees.

According to the report, from the beginning of the outbreak, public health communication to the media and the public was disjointed and confusing. No single, coordinated voice was heard; instead, five agencies – two federal and three state – announced the outbreak over the course of four days with large variations in facts and messages. Data were also presented inconsistently. Three weeks into the communications effort, one of the key federal agencies significantly changed – with no explanation – the manner in which it presented outbreak data. Data were presented first as raw number of cases in a state, then as cases per million in a state, and finally as a range of cases per state. Changing data presentation mid-stream might have been an attempt to improve, but could easily have led to misunderstandings among the intended audiences. The report authors justifiably wondered why procedures on how to team and how best to report data were not established before the effort began. According to the report, these failures in communication may well

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## Report Details Breakdown in Risk Communications

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have contributed to the public's decision to stop buying and eating tomatoes altogether in June and July.

The report also calls for organizational reforms throughout the public health system so that responses to outbreaks can be better coordinated. Report authors also question whether data were shared quickly and effectively enough among public health agencies and whether difficulties in sharing data contributed to the delayed identification of jalapeno and Serrano peppers as vehicles for the disease.

A summary and the full report are available at <http://www.producesafetyproject.org/reports?id=0001>.

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### Homeland Security Issues Risk Lexicon

Ever wish you could speak the same language as the folks in Washington, D.C. when it comes to risk? Now you can. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) recently made public its Risk Lexicon, a list of 73 terms and meanings relevant to the practice of risk management and analysis in the homeland security arena. To support integrated risk management for DHS, the lexicon lays out a common language to ease and improve communications for DHS and its partners. For each term, the lexicon provides a definition, an example of how the term is used in a sentence, and an annotation with further explanation. Here's the entry for risk communication:

**“Definition:** exchange of information with the goal of improving risk understanding, affecting risk perception and/or equipping people or groups to act appropriately in response to an identified risk .

**Annotation:** Risk communication is practiced for both non-hazardous conditions and during incidents. During an incident, risk communication is intended to provide information that fosters trust and credibility in government and empowers partners, stakeholders, and the public to make the best possible decisions under extremely difficult time constraints and circumstances.

**Example:** As part of risk communication efforts, DHS provides information regarding the current threat level to the public.”

You can find the lexicon online at [http://www.dhs.gov/xprevprot/publications/gc\\_1232717001850.shtm](http://www.dhs.gov/xprevprot/publications/gc_1232717001850.shtm).

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### Next Issue of CDC Risk Communication Newsletter Now Available

CDC recently published the second issue of *The Risk Communicator*. This issue focuses on collaboration as the most effective way to prepare for emergencies. “The best plans or theories will have little practical impact on the real world if communicators and emergency and risk coordinators don't work effectively together at all levels of a response—from

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## Next Issue of CDC Risk Communications Newsletter

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cooperating among teams to collaborating among all levels of local, state, and federal response,” said the issue’s unnamed editor in the introduction. “Our ability to impact audiences is largely dependent on the quality and scope of collaboration with partners at many levels.”

This issue includes stories about state agencies partnering with the corporate world to leverage well-known brands to aid message recognition, the World Health Organization’s International Guidelines, lessons learned in emergency message dissemination from the CDC’s joint information center during Hurricane Katrina, how to train and prepare your agency for an exercise, and help in collaborating and communicating during emergency response. The newsletter also features a list of health observances and a calendar of upcoming training opportunities.

Read this issue at  
<http://www.bt.cdc.gov/ercn/02/index.asp>.

page and the extensive use of jargon makes this page of questionable use to lay people, the information may be useful for developing other risk communication products.

**Publicity Hound Best Tips of 2008**  
[http://www.publicityhound.com/free\\_publicity/Bestof2008.html](http://www.publicityhound.com/free_publicity/Bestof2008.html)

Joan Stewart, the self-proclaimed Publicity Hound, is amazing at coming up with ways to publicize your work or cause. Particularly useful for public health education and other care communication efforts, her website is a treasure trove of tips and tricks. This e-book contains a summary of practical suggestions published in 2008 from her free electronic newsletter.

**Summary of Research on How Media Can Distort Public’s Views on Infectious Diseases**  
<http://www.cidrap.umn.edu/cidrap/content/influenza/general/news/nov0508media-br.html>

An international, collaborative center at the University of Minnesota, the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy offers stories on recent research in risk communication. This particular article highlights research on how media coverage of infectious diseases such as avian influenza can either increase feelings of risk or allow readers to gain a more accurate view of the risks.

If you need more assistance in risk communication, public involvement, or science and health communication, or need to train staff in these areas, please contact Regina Lundgren at [lundgren@owt.com](mailto:lundgren@owt.com) or 509-582-6995. For more information about risk communication, see <http://www.rlrisk.com.com>.

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### Websites of Interest

**New Drug Safety Website**  
<http://www.fda.gov/cder/drugsafety.htm>

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration started this page to provide more information on drugs being issued. While the nonintuitive organization of the